

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER
LISTED

APR 16 2008

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-9000a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

Historic name Colonial Fox Theatre

Other name/site number 037-4460-0078

2. Location

Street & number 409 North Broadway ☐ not for publication

City or town Pittsburg ☐ vicinity

State Kansas Code KS County Crawford Code 037 Zip code 66762

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Patrick Zollner
Patrick Zollner, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer
Kansas State Historical Society

2/29/08
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional Comments.)

Signature of commenting official / Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

☐ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the National Register

☐ removed from the National Register

☐ other, (explain:)

Colonial Fox Theatre
Name of Property

Crawford County, Kansas
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
☐ public-local
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1		total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of KS MPS

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter Categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE: theater

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE: theater

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19TH & 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS:

Italian Renaissance

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation: CONCRETE

Walls: STONE, BRICK

Roof: ASPHALT

Other:

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Colonial Fox Theatre

Name of Property

Crawford County, Kansas

County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register)

- ☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1919-1958

Significant Dates

1919-1926

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering
Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository:

Kansas State Historical Society

Colonial Fox Theatre
Name of Property

Crawford County, Kansas
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	Zone	Easting	Northing
2	Zone	Easting	Northing

3	Zone	Easting	Northing
4	Zone	Easting	Northing

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

Name/title Joel P. Rhodes, Ph.D.

Organization Southeast Missouri State University

Date December 17, 2007

Street & number MS 2960

Telephone _____

City or town Cape Girardeau

State MO

Zip code 63701

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

Name Colonial Fox Theatre Foundation / c/o Vonnie Corsini

Street & number P.O. Box 33

Telephone _____

City or town Pittsburg

State Kansas

Zip code 66762

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503

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Colonial Fox Theatre
Pittsburg, Crawford County, KS

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Summary

The Colonial Fox Theatre is located at 409 North Broadway in Pittsburg, Crawford County, Kansas (population 19,234). The largest city in southeast Kansas, Pittsburg is approximately 10 miles southeast of the county seat of Girard and approximately 3 miles west of the Missouri state line. The building, which is approximately 50 feet wide from north to south and 170 feet deep from east to west, was constructed in 1919-1920 as part of the commercial corridor of Broadway near the intersection of that thoroughfare with Fourth Street, the historic center of Pittsburg.

In general form, composition, and detailing the Colonial Fox exhibits many characteristics of the movie palace property type in commercial districts of the United States during the era between the World Wars. The Italian Renaissance Revival styling of the theatre draws from popular architectural trends of the period. The distinctive features include a dentilated cornice, raked tapestry brick with terra cotta detail embellishments, and an open arched portico entrance, which is partially obscured by an extended art deco marquee. The building has a foundation of concrete with some indications of stone and solid masonry walls. Arched steel trusses support the roof, starting off tall on the east end and falling to the west with an approximately six foot slope. Despite reversible alterations to the façade in 1959 and the addition of the marquee, the majority of the character defining stylistic features and original exterior materials are extant and the Colonial Fox Theatre maintains a high degree of architectural integrity.

Elaboration

Setting

The Colonial Fox Theatre at 409 North Broadway has a primary eastern façade orientation facing Pittsburg's main commercial street, Broadway (a north to south thoroughfare). It is situated toward the southern end of Broadway's 400 block – an historic, contiguous two-part commercial block – near the intersection of Broadway and Fourth Street (an east to west thoroughfare).¹ This intersection is the center of Pittsburg's historic downtown. To the north of the theatre is a vacant lot, which has disrupted the contiguous flow of the block since the Jones Store Company building burnt circa 1970s. Immediately north of this lot is the First State Bank Building (now the M&I Bank), which was built in 1903. South of the theatre, on the northwest corner of the Fourth and Broadway intersection, are the two buildings which make up the Crowell Drug Company. The four-story Crowell building at 401 N. Broadway was built by Thomas J. Crowell in 1902. An historic, contiguous two-part commercial block faces the theatre from the east side of Broadway. The theatre directly abuts a concrete sidewalk on the front (east) and an alley on the rear (west).

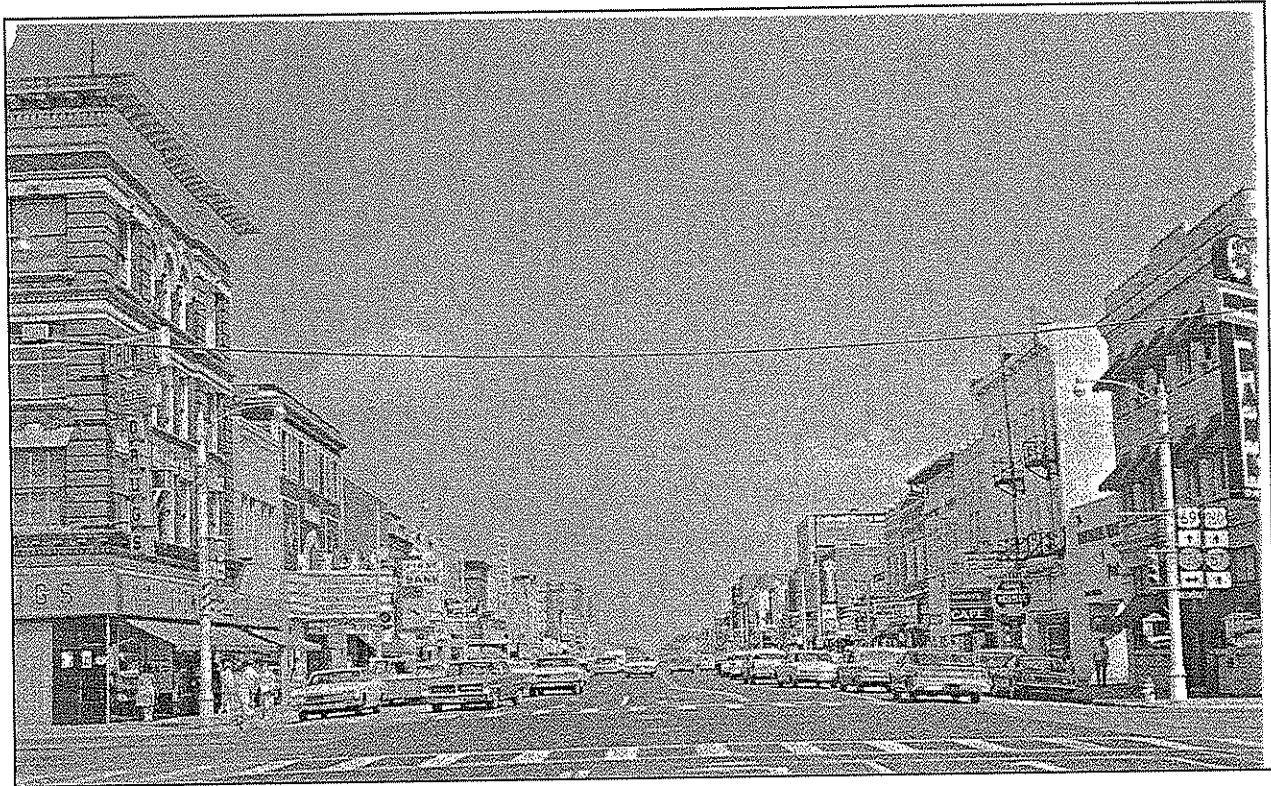
¹ Sanborn Map Company, Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Pittsburg, Crawford County, Kansas, (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1923), Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

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Colonial Fox Theatre
Pittsburg, Crawford County, KS



Broadway corridor, facing north from the intersection of Fourth Street and Broadway, Pittsburg, Kansas, circa 1970s

Exterior

The exaggerated two-story Colonial Fox Theatre is an Italian Renaissance Revival style rectangular building with beaux-arts details. The theatre measures 50 feet wide from north to south and 170 feet deep from east to west, which is not uncommon of Italian Renaissance design in this period. Aside from the Renaissance style there is also a horizontal emphasis to the building that draws from the Arts and Crafts movement that was popular at the time. Below the dentilated cornice, the Colonial Fox's broad, flat façade is comprised mainly of raked tapestry brick with terra cotta detail embellishments. These embellishments frame the primary façade and likewise frame six rectangular spaces that are situated symmetrically in pairs below the cornice. The outer two spaces (north and south) are steel ventilation ducts while the inner four are bricked over. It is probably that the inner four spaces were also ventilation ducts to accommodate the original 1920s ventilating system but were bricked up when air conditioning was introduced, perhaps sometime in the 1930s when these systems became less expensive for theaters of the Colonial Fox's size.

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Colonial Fox Theatre
Pittsburg, Crawford County, KS

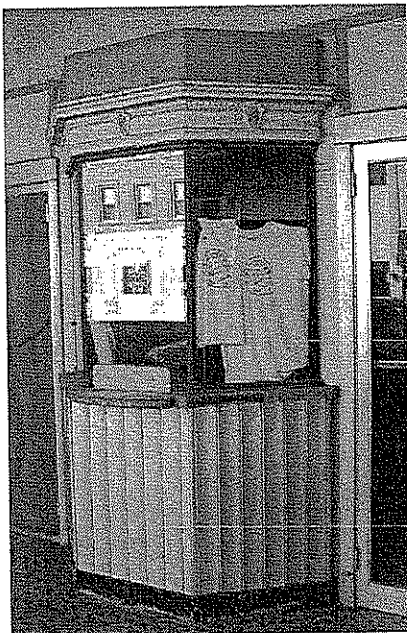
Below, on the second story level, terra cotta embellishments frame two symmetrically placed squares which flank the entrance on each side (north and south). Centered inside each square is a terra cotta diamond pattern surrounded by a herringbone brick pattern. Located between these diamonds on the second story level, immediately over the original portico entrance at the center of the primary façade, is an inset panel comprised of terra cotta tiles spelling the name "Colonial" surrounded by decorative terra cotta detailing. The keystone of the arched portico entrance is likewise detailed with a terra cotta letter "C."



Colonial Fox Theatre, Pittsburg, Kansas

On the street level elements of a combination brick and pressed metal false front from the 1959 renovation extends nearly a third of the way up the primary façade. Most of the pressed metal has been removed but masonry still covers much of the original portico entrance, pilasters, and the four storefronts, which flanked the entrance. The storefronts on the south remain and now serve as the Colonial Fox Foundation's office space, although with street entrance only consisting of a single wooden door and two large vertical window openings, each a fixed sash with single pane. The shops on the north are vacant

and have no street entrance. The primary entrance to the Colonial Fox features a central ticket booth of pressed metal and glass, which is adorned, with a cornice of ornamental plaster. The ticket booth is flanked by recessed double steel doors on both the north and south sides. The same matte-glazed ceramic tiles with latticework pattern that cover the foyer flooring extend to the sidewalk. Brushed-metal framed, pedimented movie display cases are mounted to the brick façade on the north and south of the entrance (two on the north and one on the south). The north and west walls are unadorned, except for a steel vent, electrical wiring, and single steel door on the west end which provides access to the backstage area. The south wall is attached to the contiguous two-part Crowell Drug Company.



Ticket Booth

The metal art deco, auto-oriented marquee extends horizontally from the theatre's primary façade directly over the entrance. Off-white in color with red trim, the triangular marquee is adorned with moving lights and a large red "F" on its outermost edge. On both the marquee's north and south angled elevations metal letters spell out the word "Fox."

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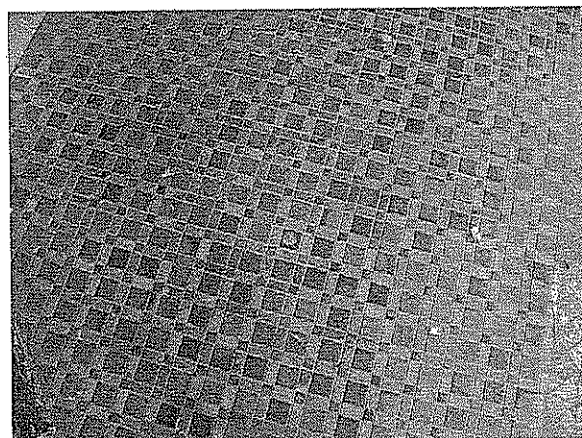
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Colonial Fox Theatre
Pittsburg, Crawford County, KS

Interior

The plan and finishes of the Colonial Fox Theatre replicate the typical layout of a movie palace from the 1920s. Located directly inside the entrance is an interior foyer, or outer-lobby, which retains most of its original materials and features from the 1926 renovation. The floor is decorated with matte-glazed ceramic tiles in a latticework pattern. The wainscot (including the interior west elevation of the ticket booth) is decorated with glazed ceramic tiles with geometric detailing. The plaster walls are adorned with brushed-metal framed movie display cases. The suspended ceiling from the 1926 renovation has been partially removed to reveal the original open arched entrance. A double set of paired wooden doors with full-length glass panes lead from the interior foyer to the lobby. A single wooden door on the north wall leads into the unused northern shop.



Colonial Fox Theatre - Interior Foyer

Directly west of the foyer, the lobby spans roughly the width of the theatre and contains the concession stand, restrooms, and two ramped entryways to the auditorium. On the west lobby wall, the recessed concession stand is centered opposite the doors leading in from the foyer. The original theatre design in the 1920s did not include a concession stand in its small inner lobby. This current concession location and configuration probably reflects the 1926 renovation, but the display case for "Refrigerated Candies" with brushed metal and glass materials suggests that it may have been part of the 1959 renovation or later.

The two ramped entryways to the auditorium flank the concession stand to the north and south. Those two doors leading in from the lobby on the east side feature art deco door frames. A Ladies Room is located on the south wall of the lobby while a Men's Room is located on west wall to the north of the northernmost doorway to the auditorium. Both restroom doorways feature art deco doorframes and are designated accordingly with art deco signage. Directly across the lobby from the Men's Room is the doorway leading downstairs to the basement. The lobby floor is carpeted except for linoleum, which frames the lobby space. The unadorned plaster walls are white. Florescent light fixtures hang from the lobby ceiling.

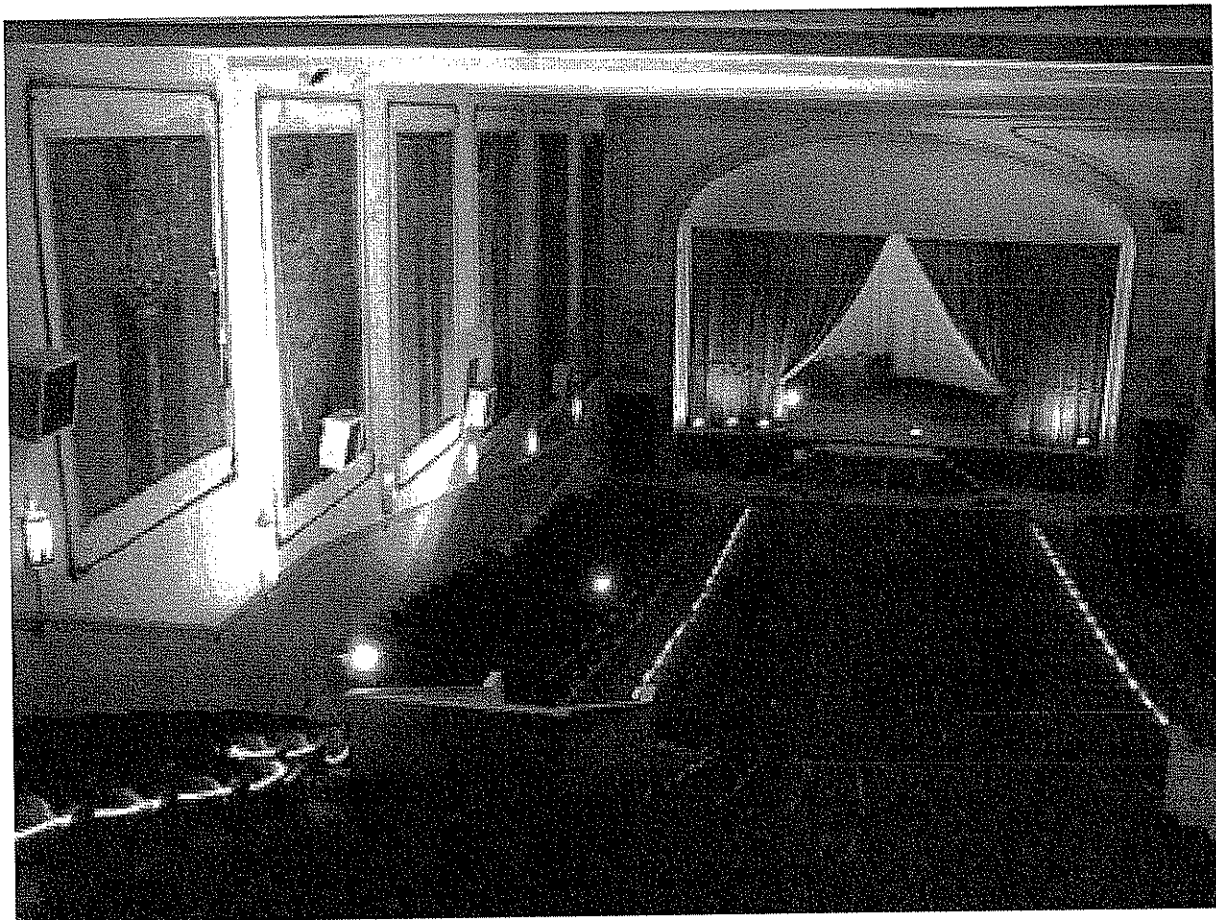
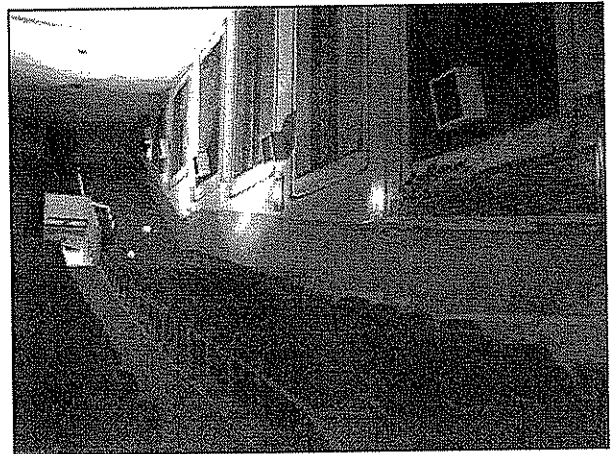
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Colonial Fox Theatre
Pittsburg, Crawford County, KS

Two ramped hallways ascend from the doorways on the north and south of the concession stand into the cavernous and boxy auditorium. Carpet covers the hallway floors and the walls are adorned with a geometric patterned wooden banister on each side. The auditorium, which originally seated 1,200, has no balcony but utilizes stadium seating with double aisles. The concrete floor gradually slopes downward toward the stage on the west from the back of the auditorium on the east. Carpeting covers the aisle areas. The American Seating Company's Bodiform auditorium chairs (similar to those in the Augusta Theatre in Augusta, Kansas) with red upholstery and cast iron frames were installed in 1949. Below the 30-foot ceiling the plaster walls of the auditorium are white. Ornamental plaster embellishes many of the walls, corners, and the proscenium arch.

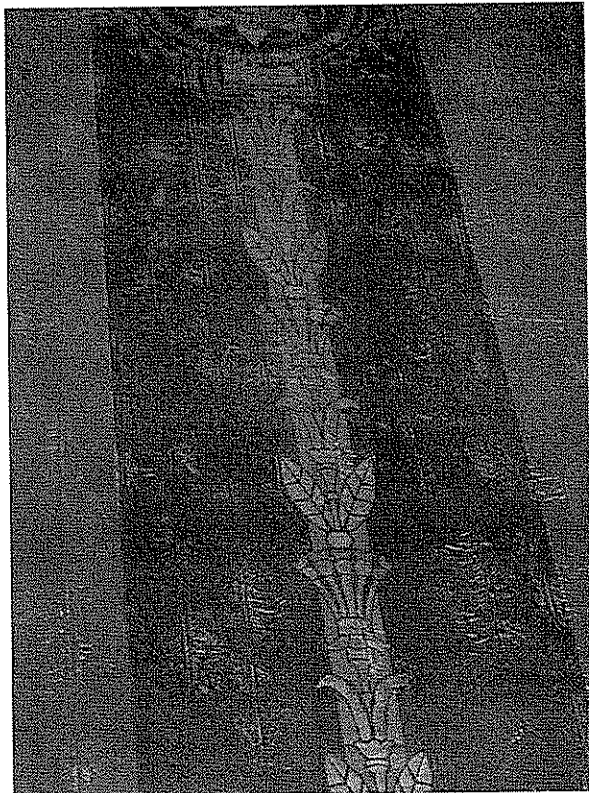


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Colonial Fox Theatre
Pittsburg, Crawford County, KS



Colonial Fox Theatre - Art Deco Tapestry Pattern

There are also eight vertical ornamental plaster frames on both the north and south walls. These large frames measurement 10 feet 9 ½ inches wide and are staggered in height in relation to the slope of the floor. The largest frames nearest the stage are 26 feet high with each respective frame from west to east diminishing in height by 2 feet (24, 22, 20 etc.). The areas inside each of the frames were painted horsehair veneer, but the veneers have been removed to reveal tapestries decorated in art deco patterns mounted to the walls. It is suggested by the Kansas Historical Theatre Association that these plaster frames probably served as the border for the semi-atmospheric murals from the 1920s era and that under the art deco tapestries, the murals are extant.

Wall mounted vertical art deco fixtures provide the lighting. The stage on the west wall measures fifty feet by thirty-seven feet and could accommodate live performances. The ceiling consists of rectangular asbestos tiles.

Below the lobby, and accessed by the stairway in the lobby, is a basement. The walls are white plaster with glazed white ceramic tile extending three-quarters of the way up. The flooring is glazed white ceramic hextile. The stairway from the lobby opens on the basement's west wall. On the east wall a staircase leads to the street level, but access to Broadway was removed during the 1926 renovation.

HISTORICAL RENOVATIONS

1920

Historically, between the theatre's completion in 1920 to 1926, the street level façade featured an open arched portico entrance. There was a loosely Palladian relationship between the center entrance and flanking fenestration with terra cotta trim work around the two pilasters and archway. The Colonial Fox's portico entrance was flanked by four shops (or "rooms"), which opened onto the street and into the portico. Above the plate glass windows of the northern shop were various advertising signage. The interior consisted of a small inner lobby, cavernous auditorium, and basement with glazed white ceramic tile on the floor and walls (extant). The auditorium, which seated 1,200, had no balcony but utilized stadium seating with the floor gradually sloping downward to the west from the last row of seats to the stage. An orchestra pit was located immediately in front of the stage. The theatre's plaster walls were originally decorated in blue and white tones with painted semi-atmospheric vertical canvas murals on the

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Colonial Fox Theatre
Pittsburg, Crawford County, KS

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walls of the auditorium. Ornamental plaster embellishments framed the murals and trimmed many of the walls, corners, crown molding, and the proscenium arch.

1926

In 1926 the Colonial Fox underwent a major renovation, which produced its present interior configuration. The open arched entrance was enclosed and a suspended ceiling was installed. The extant ticket booth, which had been located at the rear of the entrance, was moved out toward the sidewalk to its present location. This created the theatre's interior foyer or outer-lobby. The present flooring with matte-glazed ceramic tiles in a latticework pattern and the wainscot decorated with glazed ceramic tiles with geometric detailing were most likely part of this renovation.

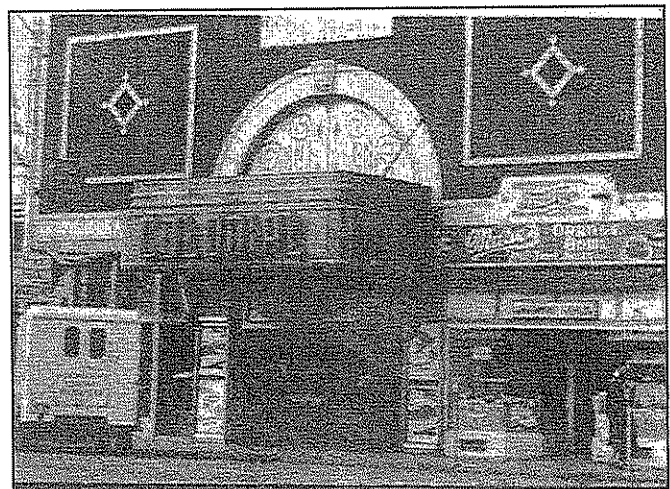
In addition to new carpeting, new lighting, new projection system, new drapes, and painting in the auditorium, a lounge for women was added in the inner lobby and the stairway leading from the basement to the street was removed.

In the auditorium the stage was expanded to its present 50 feet by 37 feet with the extra 10 feet in depth covering the orchestra pit. To accommodate this eastward expansion of the stage, the west wall was also extended out several feet immediately east of the original (extant) and a second ornamental proscenium arch was fabricated.

A new auto-oriented rectangular marquee, which extended 10 feet out over the sidewalk, and measured 25 feet wide from north to south, was also added. The primary eastern elevation of the art deco marquee spelled out "Colonial," as did the secondary northern and southern elevations.

1959

In 1959 the Colonial Fox underwent another renovation, which produced the configuration of its present façade. A combination brick and pressed metal false front covered the original northern store entrances and pilasters on the lower façade. The shops on the south remain, although with street entrance only. The shops on the north were left with foyer access only. The present metal art deco Fox marquee replaced the 1926 marquee.



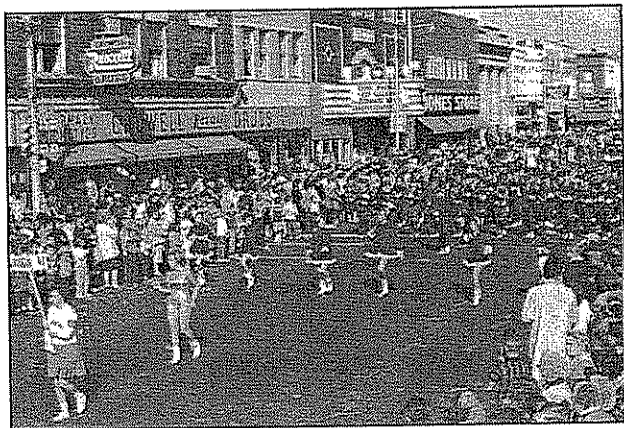
Colonial Fox circa 1950s

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Colonial Fox Theatre
Pittsburg, Crawford County, KS



Colonial Fox circa 1960s

Integrity

Although vacant since the mid-1980s, the Colonial Fox continues to reflect its historic function as an entertainment venue in southeast Kansas. With only minor alterations to the floor plan in 1926 and the 1959 alterations to the façade and the addition of the Fox marquee, the building retains its original form, proportions, scale, and massing. All of its character-defining elements – including the Fox marquee which may be retained due to its close association with the theatre since 1959 – and original materials remain extant, including but not limited to its raked tapestry brick with terra cotta detail embellishments and open

arched portico entrance. It is highly probable that the terra cotta trim work around the two pilasters and archway were merely covered by the reversible false front.

Despite damage and removal of some of the historic finishes since the 1926 renovation, the interior – including the basement – effectively maintains much of its original configuration, design, and materials. The arched entry in the outer-lobby is extant under the suspended ceiling. It is also probable that beneath all the painted canvass veneers in the auditorium, the tapestries decorated in art deco patterns mounted to the walls are extant. And below those perhaps the semi-atmospheric murals are also extant.

Many of the historic alterations reflect the evolution of the movie industry and therefore contribute to the theatre's overall significance, in particular the Fox marquee. Although not part of the 1920s era façade composition and arrangement, the marquee will be retained in the theatre's rehabilitation because it is an example of theatre evolution and due to its close association in the public imagination with the theatre since 1959. The Colonial Fox Theatre maintains a high degree of architectural integrity in both the interior and exterior. As such it clearly conveys its association with the historic architectural and cultural trends of theatres and entertainment venues in the twentieth century.

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Colonial Fox Theatre
Pittsburg, Crawford County, KS

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Colonial Fox Theatre at 409 North Broadway in Pittsburg, Crawford County, Kansas is significant under National Register Criterion A for the area of ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION and under Criterion C for the area of ARCHITECTURE, as documented in the Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF) "Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas." The Colonial Fox Theatre has direct associations with the historic context "Historical Development of Public Entertainment in Kansas, 1854-1954" developed as part of the MPDF and meets the MPDF registration requirements. Built on Pittsburg's main thoroughfare in 1919-1920 – just prior to the height of the traditional movie palace years (1925-1930) – the Colonial Fox's Italian Renaissance Revival style, exterior terra cotta detail embellishments, and loosely Palladian relationship between the center entrance's archway, pilasters, and flanking fenestration, reflects small town sensibilities applied to movie palace architecture. Between the two world wars, the Colonial Theatre, as it was called before the 1950s, was one of several theatres, which anchored downtown entertainment and nightlife in southeast Kansas' largest city. Today, the Colonial Fox is the only remaining theatre from the inter-war period in Pittsburg or Crawford County. The theatre's dual name reflects the fact that from its opening in 1920, until the late 1950s, it was known as the Colonial. In 1959 the Fox Kansas Theatre Company, which leased the theatre, re-named it the Fox, the name by which it was known until closing in the mid-1980s. Its proposed adaptive reuse as a live performance venue and movie theater is compatible with its original functions. The Colonial Fox was listed on the Register of Historic Kansas Places in 2000 and the Kansas Preservation Alliance has included it on the 2008 Most Endangered Properties in Kansas List. The period of significance for the Colonial Fox Theatre begins with its construction in 1919-1920 and ends in 1958, the arbitrary fifty-year threshold for National Register eligibility.

PROPERTY HISTORY

Incorporated in 1879 Pittsburg, Kansas was the mining and smelting heart of an area rich in natural resources. In 1904 there were 55 coal companies (primarily strip mining) in and around the city, employing 11,835 people.² In addition to its signature extractive industries, at the time of the Colonial's construction, Pittsburg was home to the Kansas City Southern railroad's main shops, numerous foundries and machine shops, mills, boiler works, a brick plant, sewer pipe works, various factories, the Kansas Manual Training Normal School (Pittsburg State University), and the Hotel Stilwell which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Like most theatres built during the period between the wars, the Colonial – located near the city's commercial heart at the intersection of Broadway and Fourth Street – was a primary attraction in

² Frank W. Blackmar, ed., Kansas: A Cyclopedic of State History. Embracing Events, Institutions, Industries, Counties, Cities, Towns, Prominent Persons, Etc. Volume II (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912), 480.

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Colonial Fox Theatre
Pittsburg, Crawford County, KS

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downtown Pittsburg's thriving nightlife which roared during "the Twenties" as the forces of modernization increasingly plugged the city into an electrifying mass national culture based on consumption, leisure, automobility, and amusement. As was noted in the Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF) "Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas," commonly in developing, medium-sized Kansas communities, status conscious civic leaders and middle-class residents considered a version of a big city "movie palace" emblematic of their community's "modern" or "progressive" downtown. This was certainly the case in Pittsburg, where the Colonial lent the necessary "design panache" to Broadway which locals believed was only befitting of southeast Kansas' leading commercial, transportation, cultural, and entertainment center.³ Yet perhaps most importantly, the Colonial's accessibility to all classes and eventually all ethnic groups, afforded avenues for both escapism and inclusion into local and national cultural for Pittsburg's diverse working-class population. Primarily because of the extractive industries Pittsburg historically featured a unique cultural diversity compared to most cities in Kansas, with large numbers of working-class immigrants. During a time when a modern mass society was developing, the overall experience of attending a motion picture at the Colonial theatre provided invaluable exposure to, and inclusion in, this American mass culture for these various groups. Though not particularly an agent of social equality, it is believed that the Colonial was the first theatre in Pittsburg to admit African-Americans, albeit in a de facto segregated section in the upper northeast portion of the auditorium.

The Colonial was conceived, owned, and operated by the Pittsburg Amusement Company, which also operated the Mystic and Klock theatres in Pittsburg. At the time construction began on the Colonial in June 1919, the Pittsburg Amusement Company consisted of the estate of W.H. Daly, R.H. and G.E. Klock, and Alexander Besse. A prominent coal-mining entrepreneur and influential local businessman, Besse was a founding member of the Pittsburg Amusement Company and served variously as its president, treasurer, and general manager until his death in 1944. In addition to owning business and residential property in and around Pittsburg, the French immigrant was a pioneer in the area's steam shovel strip mining. He founded the Besse-Cockerill Coal Company circa 1910, one of the first companies to use large steam shovels. For a time he owned the Oskaloosa Coal Company, and had interest in the Pittsburg & Arkansas Zinc Company in Zinc, Arkansas, as well as other zinc and lead mining operations around Joplin, Missouri. The twelve-story Hotel Besse (1926-1927), still easily Pittsburg's tallest building, is named for him because of his role as the hotel's primary stockholder (he contributed \$30,000 to its construction) and his capacity as its vice-president. That a mining owner such as Besse would deal so heavily in both real estate and amusements may reflect the corporate paternalism between management and labor common during the era or nothing more than restive entrepreneurial instincts.

Again similar to most theaters in the 1920s, which were designed by local architects – in accordance to styles established in large cities – according to *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, the Colonial was

³ Elizabeth Rosin and Dale Nimz, "Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas" (National Register of Historic Places nomination, Multiple Property Documentation Form, 2004), 49.

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"constructed along the same lines as the Isis in Kansas City" blending opulence, economy, and small town sensibilities in its Italian Renaissance Revival style.⁴ Asa Messenger was the general contractor and chief builder, as well as, part owner of the Colonial. In addition to his various residential and commercial structures, Messenger was known as "Pittsburg's Premier Builder," primarily because of his work on the Masonic temple, the remodeling of the National Bank, and rebuilding of Russ Hall at the Normal school. Although modeled after the Isis in Kansas City, all the Colonial's builders and craftsmen were from Pittsburg. The Pittsburg Boiler & Machine Company, which also manufactured coal-mining machinery, produced the building's 1,000 pound steel girders, which support the roof. "All of the beautiful stone work for the Colonial theatre" was done by Hance White & Son Marble Works while all the woodwork was done at Messenger's mill.⁵ Harry A. Clark did the plumbing and the Pittsburg Cornice Works installed the "Wise Furnace," with W.C. Wilson completing this and other "metal work" for the theatre's ventilating and heating system. Wilson designed a "split air plane" which supplied fresh air to the projectionist booth while keeping film odors from the public. Borden-Brisbin Electrical Company installed the Colonial's eight and a half miles of wiring, 20,000 conduits, and special dimming device on the auditorium lights. H.A. Smith decorated the Colonial with material furnished by A.O. Wheeler, the city's "exclusive dealer" of Sherwin-Williams paints. Eventually the Colonial cost approximately \$80,000 to complete, with Messenger's weekly payroll running between \$500 to \$1,800.

On March 16, 1920, *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight* ran a special 8 page section to commemorate the opening of "Pittsburg's New Playhouse," which it referred to as the "the largest and most modern theatre in southeast Kansas."⁶ When the Colonial officially opened the next day, 2,000 attended the St. Patrick's Day showing of "Everywoman," an eight-reel Paramount-Artcraft feature starring Violet Heming, Theodore Roberts, and Wanda Hawley (like other theaters which aligned themselves with the motion picture studios forming in the 1920s, the Colonial was initially contracted to show Paramount-Artcraft movies). At least 1,000 had to be turned away. Most seats went for .35 that first night, but 500 sold for .50. A six-piece orchestra, later a "Regular Every Day Feature at the Colonial," played a special opening night score. For the remainder of the week, the Colonial established its permanent schedule with the box office opening at 6:00pm, the first picture beginning at 6:30, followed by vaudeville at 8:00, a second show at 8:30, and more vaudeville at 10:00. There were no matinees on opening day, but thereafter the matinee became a staple.

Although some lighting did not work and some minor details were not complete on opening day, the Colonial was described as having "...no glamour-no glare-just that restful; peaceful and charmed feeling that comes to one when they look upon a thing of beauty."⁷ The auditorium originally seated 1,200 in an innovative stadium arrangement, which apparently reflected Alexander Besse's personal dislike or aversion to balconies in theaters. This configuration, in which the floor gently slopes "from the last row

⁴ *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, March 16, 1920.

⁵ *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, March 16, 1920.

⁶ *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, March 16, 1920.

⁷ *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, March 16, 1920.

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of seats down to the stage” assured that no patron’s view was obstructed.⁸ Behind the orchestra pit (nonextant) the original 50 feet by 27 feet stage was large enough to accommodate the traveling vaudeville shows booked out of Chicago through the Interstate Booking Agency. Air was circulated by a ventilating system consisting of airshafts and electric fans (nonextant). At the time of the opening, *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight* reported that “the theatre is effectively decorated in white and blue tones.”⁹ Some recall that the walls of the auditorium were covered by semi-atmospheric canvas murals depicting outdoor scenes. Quite popular in the 1920s, the atmospheric movement, begun by prolific palace theater architect John Eberson, replaced standard ornamentation in theater design with theme based interiors and exteriors – such as Italian gardens, Persian courts, and Egyptian temples – to create an overall fantasy atmosphere in the theater. Though modest by comparison, the *Headlight*’s mention of the “the scenery and curtains which are being painted...” indicates that the canvas murals in the Colonial may have been painted with this purpose in mind.¹⁰

Greatly enhancing the movie going experience, *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight* recorded that “the new theatre building houses five business enterprises” which were located in four shops (or “rooms”) off the Colonial’s portico entrance and in its basement.¹¹ The basement under the foyer housed W.H. Kelley’s barber shop and pool hall. With white glazed hextile on the floor and white glazed tile 8 feet up the walls (extant), Kelly’s featured four new pool tables, three barber chairs, and a way for sporting customers to enter from Broadway without venturing into the theatre. This staircase was removed in 1926. Consumers’ Coffee Company occupied one of the ground floor rooms, which flanked the portico. Owned by M.L. Probst, Consumers’ had originally been Wright Brothers Dry Goods Company, which had been located on the site before the Colonial. Roasting coffee and peanuts fresh daily “Just Like You Get In The Big Cities,” and serving as the downtown outlet for Wright’s Green Houses, Consumers’ must have given the entire lobby area quite an appealing aroma. The Little Kitchenette, owned and operated by O.M. Richmond, served home cooked meals and homemade pies in another room. Although it advertised its “neat fixtures and all the latest modern equipment,” The Little Kitchenette certainly contributed its own distinct smells as well.¹² On the south side of the entrance, The Smoke Shop, run by W.H. Seleman, catered to both male and female patrons with boxes of chocolate, assorted candies, magazines, and a fountain for the ladies, and cigars for men. The Pittsburg Shoe Shining Parlor occupied the remaining room.

The 1920s saw impressive economic and physical growth in Pittsburg. As coal mining companies greatly increased payrolls each month at mid-decade, new home construction accelerated. The Kansas Manual Training Normal School located in the town since 1903 was designated the Kansas State Teachers College of Pittsburg in 1923 and its president William Brandenburg oversaw numerous construction projects, which greatly increased the size of campus. In 1926 – predicted by civic boosters to be a “banner year for Pittsburg” – commercial and residential construction broke 1 million dollars, outpacing

⁸ *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, March 16, 1920.

⁹ *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, March 16, 1920.

¹⁰ *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, March 16, 1920.

¹¹ *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, March 16, 1920.

¹² *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, March 16, 1920.

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1925.¹³ It was during the spring of 1926 that the Colonial briefly closed for what was described as “extensive exterior remodeling and complete redecorating inside.”¹⁴ In addition to a new indirect lighting system (which probably include the present art deco fixtures), projection machine, carpeting, and drapes, the stage was expanded to the present 50 feet by 37 feet, the extra 10 feet in depth covering the orchestra pit.

Yet, indicative of innovative theater design in medium sized Kansas towns of the era – which often incorporated elaborate lobbies, lounges, and broad canopy lighted marquees – the most significant aspects of the 1926 remodeling were the creation of the current “interior foyer” and addition of a marquee.¹⁵ According to *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, “The old lobby is being torn out completely and will be replaced with an extension of the theatre to the sidewalk with commodious foyer inside the building. A ladies rest room is being installed. The ticket office will be at the edge of the sidewalk and will be fronted with an attractive illuminated marquee. A new 25-foot electric sign to be suspended over the sidewalk will be installed.” By “doing away with the present large dome entrance,” moving the box office out to the street, and adding the extended marquee (an “...exact duplicate of illuminated front extensions of modern show houses being built in the larger cities...”), it was hoped the remodeling would offer “a metropolitan theatrical aspect along Broadway.”¹⁶ This 1926 remodeling, and in particular the forward orientation of the box office and more specifically the addition of the auto-oriented marquee reflects the changes in theater architecture corresponding to the increased importance of the automobile. These types of exterior alterations were becoming common by the early 1930s as a means of extending the theater façade so that the structure stood out physically and aesthetically from the two-part contiguous blocks of American commercial districts.¹⁷

Once again Asa Messenger undertook the \$15,000 project, which lasted nearly two weeks. During the remodeling in May 1926, the Colonial also shuffled its management. While the Pittsburg Amusement Company continued to own the properties, the Colonial and Klock (another of the company’s theatres) were leased to the Midland theatre circuit of Kansas City. At the time, Midland operated theatres in Wichita, Hutchinson, and Salina, Kansas, and was building the Midland Theatre in Kansas City, Missouri, at 13th and Main. As part of the deal, the Klock underwent a more extensive renovation than the Colonial, overseen by the Boller Brothers, a prominent Kansas City, Missouri, theater design firm. Upon completion, the Klock was re-opened as the Midland Theatre. Although there are no records in the Boller Brothers Papers at the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection to verify the firm’s direct involvement with the 1926 renovation of the Colonial Fox, based on similarities in design and the research of local historians it also seems probable that the Boller Brothers did, in fact, contribute in some capacity.

¹³ Pittsburg Almanac 1876-1976, 49.

¹⁴ *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, May 17, 1926.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Rosin and Dale Nimz, “Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas” (National Register of Historic Places nomination, Multiple Property Documentation Form, 2004), 49.

¹⁶ *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, May 17, 1926.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Rosin and Dale Nimz, “Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas” (National Register of Historic Places nomination, Multiple Property Documentation Form, 2004), 49.

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According to the Kansas Historic Theater Association, the shop spaces flanking the main entrance, the layout of the interior foyer, molding style – including the use of a shield in the molding detail – and the general layout of the auditorium suggest the influence of these prolific theater architects.

Sometime before 1944, the Pittsburg Amusement Company leased the Midland and Colonial to Fox Kansas Theatre Company. In 1958 the pressed metal and brick false fronts were begun on the Colonial, and when the current art-deco Fox marquee was attached in 1959, the Colonial was officially re-named the Fox Theatre. The theater operated as such until it closed in 1985.

Colonial Fox Theatre Foundation

In 2006 the Colonial Fox Theatre Foundation (CFTF), a community-based 501(c) 3 not-for-profit, organized to save the Colonial Fox Theatre. Phase I of the CFTF program included three goals: 1) paying off \$8,000 in back taxes on the theatre; 2) paying off the \$12,500 second mortgage; and 3) purchasing the Colonial Fox property for \$40,000. Through the fundraising campaign – “400 for \$40,000” – these three goals were completed in November 2007 and the theatre is now the property of the CFTF.

In October 2007 the CFTF contracted with William Morris Associates, Architects, to develop the Restoration Master Plan, which will determine the cost parameters of rehabilitation. After the costs of acquisition were met, the CFTF will have \$30,000 in hand toward the cost of rehabilitation. A Phase II capital fund drive will now be implemented to complete the funding of the major rehabilitation of the theatre for adaptive re-use. Phase III, scheduled to begin simultaneously with construction, will raise a \$500,000 endowment fund.

The CFTF Board of Trustees includes experts in structural engineering, theatre operations, restoration, history, historic preservation, and fundraising who are dedicated to developing a project that will allow the theatre to be rehabilitated and operated as a self-sustaining cultural center.

The mission of the Colonial Fox Theatre Foundation is to enhance and facilitate the economic health and revitalization of downtown Pittsburg by the preservation and utilization of the Colonial Fox Theatre. Toward that end the organization will protect, operate and enhance the historic Colonial Fox Theatre as an arts and cultural gathering place. When the Colonial Fox Theatre reopens its doors, it will provide a venue for professional and amateur artists alike, and will feature theatrical performances, music concerts, and a variety of independent/classic films. The theatre might also house a café and educational and corporate meeting space. Future programming will include becoming host to art exhibits, film and music festivals and extended performing art workshops. This multi-use capability holds the key to the theatre's cultural and commercial feasibility.

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Section Number 10 & Photos Page 16 Colonial Fox Theatre
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VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The legal description of the nominated property is as follows: South ½ of lot 284 and the North ½ Lot 285, Block 21, Town of Pittsburg.

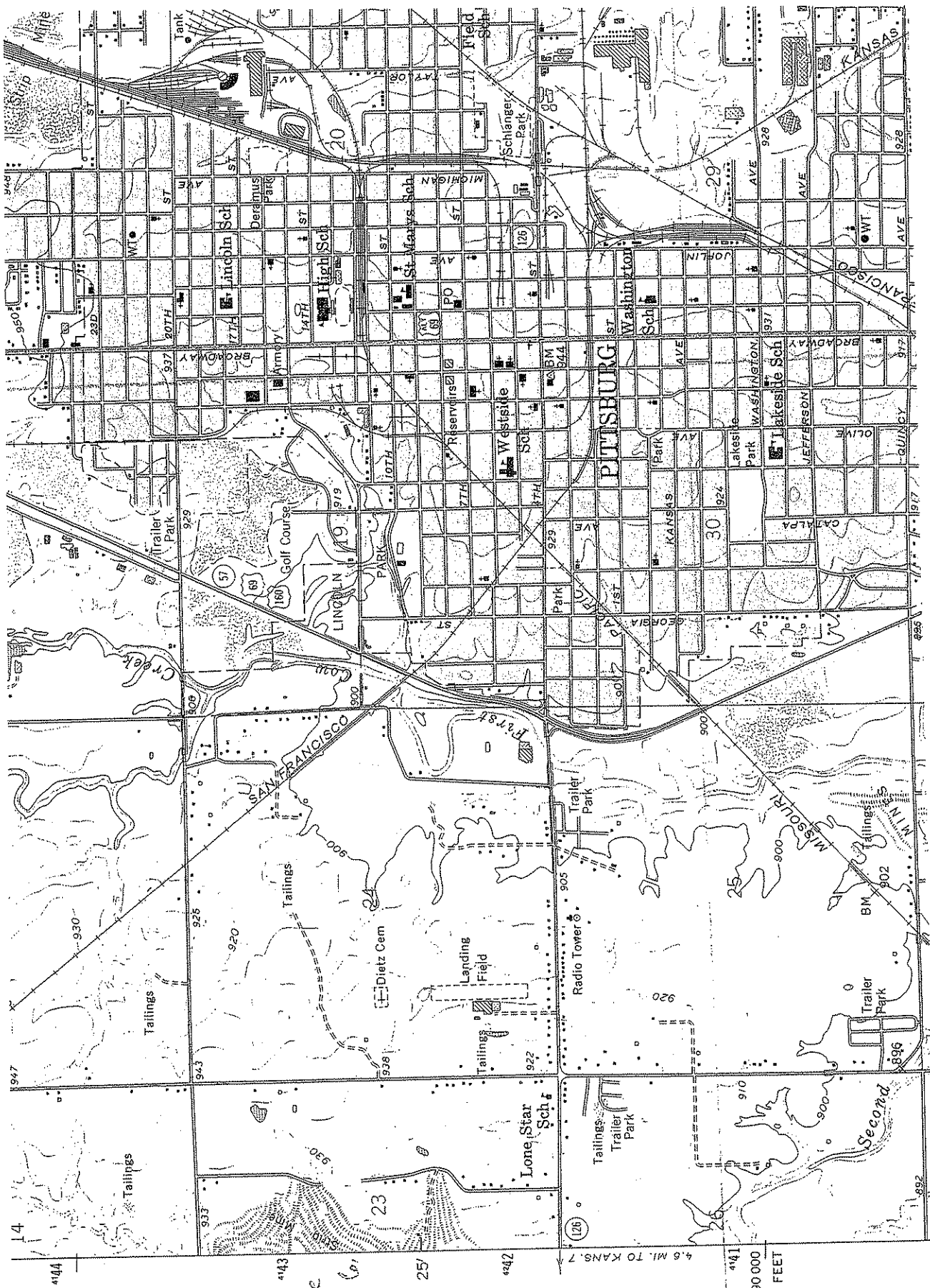
BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The nominated property includes the theater building and the land historically associated with the property.

PHOTOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Property Name: Colonial Fox Theatre
Location: 409 N Broadway, Pittsburg, Crawford County, KS
Photographer: Kristen Johnston
Date:
Location of Digital Images or Negatives: Kansas State Historical Society

- Photo 1: Primary façade, facing west
- Photo 2: Primary façade and north (side) elevation, facing west
- Photo 3: Primary façade, close-up of brick detail
- Photo 4: West (rear) elevation, facing east
- Photo 5: Primary façade, close-up of ticket booth, facing west
- Photo 6: Primary façade, close-up of arch above marquis
- Photo 7: Primary façade, close-up of movie poster case at entrance, facing south
- Photo 8: Interior, ticket booth at entrance, facing east
- Photo 9: Interior, entrance to restroom
- Photo 10: Interior, entrance into lobby from ticket booth
- Photo 11: Interior, theater auditorium showing stage, facing west
- Photo 12: Interior, theater auditorium, close-up of seating and flooring
- Photo 13: Interior, close-up of historic projector
- Photo 14: Interior, theater auditorium showing seating, facing east



Colonial Fox Theatre
Pittsburg, Crawford Co.,
Kansas
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